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West Bank "Gandhi" screenings promote non-violence

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By Diala Saadeh

RAMALLAH, West Bank (Reuters) - Embattled Palestinian president Mahmoud Abbas has found a new ally in his call for Palestinians to embrace non-violence -- Mahatma Gandhi, or at least, the Hollywood film about the late Indian leader.

Custom-dubbed in local Arabic, the 1982 epic "Gandhi" has begun screening in the Israeli-occupied West Bank and Gaza Strip as part of a campaign by a U.S. entrepreneur to persuade Palestinians to reconsider the armed uprising.

"We met with President Abbas, who was nice to us and supported the project," Jeff Skoll, the founding president of Internet auction site eBay and chief sponsor of "The Gandhi Project", told the audience at the first showing in Ramallah.

Also attending was the film's star, Oscar-winning British actor Ben Kingsley, who called Abbas "a wonderful president".

But while many Palestinians were visibly moved at the account of the Indian spiritual leader who helped his people gain independence from British rule in 1947, Gandhi's pacifist teachings look unlikely to make an impact among militants.

"We respect Gandhi, who liberated his people, but our only choice here is armed struggle," said Hassan Yousef, a leader of the Islamist group Hamas, which is sworn to the Jewish state's destruction and has carried out scores of suicide bombings.

"The Israelis pushed us to this," he said.

HOPE AND DISMAY

Bitterness and distrust divide Israelis and Palestinians despite a ceasefire declared by their leaders in February.

Israel intends to quit Gaza this summer but to keep large swathes of the West Bank, all but dashing Palestinian dreams of a state in both territories, captured in the 1967 war. But polls show that 70 percent of Palestinians oppose suicide bombings -- a reflection of widespread dismay at tactics that have drawn crushing Israeli military sweeps and alienated much of world opinion during 4 1/2 years of fighting.

"Gandhi is a model which can be applied anywhere, at any time. His values suit all nations, including Palestinians," said Hanna Elias, who produced the Arabic-dubbed version of the film. The new clemency has not penetrated all corners of Palestinian life, however.

Among the refugee camps and other militant strongholds, many regard Abbas' moderate stance with suspicion. The Palestinian president has also faced some violent protests from armed factions unhappy with his demand they disarm.

"He (Gandhi) was a hero and loyal to his people. That's what made Indians believe in his peaceful preaching," said Fahima, a resident of the West Bank refugee camp Jalazon. "Our leaders are not loyal to our cause."

Some Palestinians have even speculated that, if Abbas fails to deliver statehood and is perceived as Israel's stooge, he could be at risk of assassination -- a fate that befell Gandhi, in 1948, at the hands of an extremist fellow Hindu.

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